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ABSTRACT

Project SUCCESS (School-University Consortium Collaboratively Enabling Success for All Students) was an effort of Oklahoma State University and four nearby rural school districts to develop and deliver a graduate course on instructional competencies needed in the inclusive classroom. The goal of the project was to offer opportunities for teachers to work together to share expertise and construct meaningful experiences for professional development. The collaboration encompassed preservice and practicing teachers in both special and regular education at all educational levels. A needs assessment conducted among instructional staff in the four rural school districts collected 80 of a potential 400 responses. Teachers provided perspectives on quality teacher preparation, especially student teaching experiences, and rank ordered personal concerns regarding curriculum and supervision issues in the inclusive classroom. Responses were used to design a three-credit professional development course offered to university and public school faculties, student teachers, and parents. The course included 16 topical sessions with suggestions for classroom applications. Course sessions have been offered at various school sites, but attendance has been consistently lower than expected. Included are a summary of Project SUCCESS goals and objectives and the needs assessment statements and responses. (SV)

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PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT IN RURAL SCHOOLS: PROJECT SUCCESS SCHOOL-UNIVERSITY CONSORTIUM COLLABORATIVELY ENABLING SUCCESS FOR ALL STUDENTS

The move to inclusive environments, those general classrooms that function as the primary setting for the instruction of all students (Stainback & Stainback, 1990), has placed considerable pressure on the preparation and continuing professional development of teachers within rural school districts. Beginning and practicing professionals need specialized training for the increasingly complex and diverse demands of public school teaching. Rural schools are often struggling with reduced public funds at a time when quality initial and continued professional training is fundamental to the success of a rapidly changing educational system. Although state officials often cite the need for increased professional development, rarely are such edicts followed with sufficient funding or policy to employ the needed changes.

Due to this changing paradigm in the rural educational arena regarding the concept of Least Restrictive Environment (LRE) (Will, 1986), general education teachers feel that they have not been adequately prepared to meet such a wide variety of special needs (Lyon, Vaasson & Toomey, 1989: Villa & Thousand, 1995). Additionally, beginning teachers report an inadequate preparation for meeting the needs of students with disabilities. For example, in an analysis of data collected during the exit interviews of Oklahoma State University (OSU) general education student teachers over the last five years (1990-1995), a majority of these beginning teachers believed they needed more training regarding instructional strategies and the adaptations of materials to meet the needs of students with disabilities.

The passage of Public Law 94-142 in 1975 made available a free appropriate public education to nearly 4 million students with disabilities in the United States (Hardman, Drew, & Egan, 1996). Over twenty years later the population of students with disabilities has increased dramatically, primarily due to better assessment procedures, advances in medical technology, and changes made to the original version of Public Law 94-142. The most encompassing change to Public Law 94-142 came in 1990 when Congress amended the Education of Handicapped Children's Act (EHA) including Public Law 94-142 and renamed the law the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) (P.L. 101-476). New provisions of IDEA not only extended services guaranteed students with disabilities, but it also broadened the scope of students who qualified for special services. The end result is that educators, regardless

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of age group or subject area taught, will come into contact with learners of diverse abilities.

It is estimated that 93 percent of children with disabilities are educated in regular education programs (Kowalski, 1995). Inclusive schools are typically places where students work in more flexible learning environments, with flexible curricula and instruction (Jakupcak, Rushton, Jakupcak, & Lundt, 1996; Schirmer, Casbon & Twiss, 1995). An inclusive school environment demands more collaboration and cooperative planning among administrators, parents, and all teachers and specialists involved in the student's education.

To prepare teachers for this diverse school setting, teacher education programs must restructure their approach to teacher training. Teachers who enter today's rural classrooms need extensive education in adapting curricula and instruction modifications to work effectively with all students in an inclusive setting. To support teachers in their endeavor to gain expertise in working with students with special needs, Project SUCCESS was implemented as a collaborative program between rural schools and the university.

The Collaborative: An Oklahoma Alliance

Research indicates that university faculty, district teachers, and students of college and public school greatly benefit from a collaborative school-university partnership training program (Cornett, 1995; Coulon & Byra, 1995; Cusimano, 1990). One model that responds to the demand for improved teacher preparation and development is the Professional Development School (PDS) model (Holmes, 1990). The PDS model is perceived to present multiple opportunities for practicing teaching to positively influence others who are preparing to teach (Pugach & Johnson, 1995). Waldron (1996) advocates the implementation of school-university partnerships to redefine teaching roles to support inclusive educational practices.

As a PDS initiative, Oklahoma State University began discussions with four area rural school districts to explore the possibility of developing a mechanism to employ a professional development school model. Stillwater Public School District is the largest of the four districts; Morrison Schools is the smallest district with mostly white families; Pawnee School District includes the largest proportion of minority families (18% American Indian); and Perkin-Tryon School District covers a large farming and ranching area. Although the four districts are considered proximal to the university, characteristic of rural districts, they have over 20 school buildings with nearly one hundred miles between the farthest ranging schools within these four districts.

When school-university alliances develop, there are several methods by which to define the teacher preparation and development work. It has been suggested that collaborative partnerships are most successful when the issues chosen for collaboration

are not viewed as belonging to one or the other of the collaborators, but as "spanning the boundaries" between and among the institutions (Schlechty & Whitford, 1988, p. 193). Project SUCCESS was designed as one of several projects perceived as having the ability to span the concerns of all members of the alliance. Funding for this project was derived from two sources: (1) the Dean of the College of Education provided initial developmental funds to the Alliance, and (2) the Oklahoma State Department of Education IDEA, Part B to Stillwater Public Schools supported Project SUCCESS for the improvement of educational services to students with disabilities.

Project SUCCESS Purpose and Goals

The purpose of Project SUCCESS is to offer opportunities for various teachers to work together to share expertise, create ideas, and construct meaningful experiences for professional development. The teachers involved are special and general educators, both those already practicing and those preparing to practice at all levels (elementary, middle school, junior high and high school). The major goals of Project SUCCESS are to recruit and train participants to collaboratively design, develop, deliver, and evaluate a professional development course for mentor teachers who work extensively with student teachers. These goals are comprehensively outlined in Table 1.

Project SUCCESS Model

The Leadership Team, consisting of special and general educators in all content areas and grade levels, collaboratively developed and delivered the content of a three-hour graduate course designed to improve the instructional competencies required in meeting the needs of students with disabilities. This course specifically addresses concerns regarding the topical areas of inclusion, authentic assessment, families, technology and other areas identified by participants.

Results

A needs assessment was conducted among instructional staff at the four rural school districts. The survey was designed to collect both quantitative and qualitative information about quality teacher preparation, especially student teaching experiences. Teachers provided comments on their own student teaching experiences and what should be done to improve the OSU program. Additionally, respondents rank ordered, from 1 to 5 (with 1 representing the highest priority), personal concerns regarding curriculum and supervision issues. Approximately 80 surveys out of potentially 400 were collected for data analysis. Interestingly, the response rate differed dramatically by the size of the school. For example, one small elementary school participated at 100% (11 out of 11); whereas, there were two responses from a very large faculty at one of the high schools (3%).

Needs assessment data and Leadership Team discussions were analyzed for common trends regarding suggestions and concerns of the responding teachers.. Concerns included student teachers' seeming lack of knowledge regarding practical classroom procedures such as paperwork, time management, and extra duty assignments. Other concerns centered on some difficulties student teachers typically encounter in discipline and student/teacher relationships. Consistently, responses related to such concerns as spending more time instructing in classrooms, both during and prior to student teaching, greater effort to determine suitability for teaching prior to student teaching, and a more varied student teaching experience (i.e. multiple teachers and multiple subjects) were reported. The ranking section of the surveys shifted the focus specifically to curriculum and supervision issues. Areas of highest concern ranked in curriculum included, in order: (1) discipline, (2) knowledge of subject matter, (3) teaching styles, (4) diverse ability needs, and (5) teaching modifications. Supervision issues were ranked to reflect the highest concern in the order of: (1) classroom management, (2) professional ethics, (3) observation/feedback, (4) paperwork, and (5) professional development.

The professional development course was offered to university and public school faculties, student teachers, and parents. Participants were required to attend five out of sixteen workshops for one college credit, ten of sixteen for two, or fifteen for three hours of college credit. Courses could also be taken for continuing education units if desired. Each workshop was adapted to meet the needs of the Leadership Team who served as instructor, the topic of the concern addressed, and the teachers at the session location site. Teachers who chose to take the sessions for graduate credit kept reflective journals on their practice. Some of the topics for sessions include: Communication with Parents, Alphabet Soup: What is LRE & IEP's?, Teachers as Researchers, Modifications & Interventions, and Meeting the Needs of the Gifted Student.

The Opinions Relative to the Integration of Students with Disabilities (ORI) by Larrivee & Antonak (1993) was administered to all Leadership Team members and will be used to determine any changes in perceptions of the teachers who are attending the course components. The ORI measures the attitudes teachers have for students with disabilities in general classes. It contains 25 items that require the participant to respond according to his/her level of agreement or disagreement with the statement on a six point scale. Pre and post test scores, using the ORI will be analyzed for changes in teacher perceptions as a function of involvement in Project SUCCESS. Initial responses of the Leadership Team are presented in Table 2. The opinions of this particularly dedicated group of teachers can be interpreted to represent proponents of successful inclusion of students with disabilities into general classrooms.

Sessions have been held at varying school sites. The length of time in a group session varies depending on the topic of the session. Locations to date have included two elementary schools, one middle school and one high school in the Stillwater area. Attendance has been consistently lower than expected at all session sites. Ninety-eight

percent of workshop evaluations have been favorable for those teachers who participate.

Conclusions

Project SUCCESS is a one-year grant to develop and deliver university coursework at the graduate level to promote the interaction and collaboration between university and schools, special education and general education, elementary and secondary, and beginning and practicing teachers. The developmental phase was overwhelmingly successful with 30 members of a Leadership Team from four rural school districts and the university who met regularly to design the series of 16 topical sessions with suggested classroom applications for each session. The Project has strong administrative support; teachers have chosen to meet after school instead of arranging for substitute teachers (who would have been paid for by the grant); the university arranged to allow course vouchers to be used to take the series for college credit. Yet, relatively few teachers take advantage of the sessions. The Leadership Team has assisted in the understanding of the relatively low response to the sessions. Reasons generated include little or no incentive for teachers (Oklahoma does not require a master's degree for continued teaching certification); excessive calendar demands in the spring of the year (state mandated testing, etc.); professional development points are easily acquired; and the individual sessions are believed to be isolated experiences rather than the core of an integrated program for teacher preparation and development. These reasons provide information to promote the long-term work of the Alliance in the development of professional development schools.

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Table 1
Project SUCCESS Goals and Objectives

Goals and objectives for Project SUCCESS are summarized:	
GOAL I: To develop an infra-structure to design and deliver a course on needs of students with disabilities in the general classroom.	Objectives: To recruit and train participants for collaboration to occur between special education and general education in schools and the university.
GOAL II: To collaboratively develop a professional development course to be offered through OSU graduate credit.	Objectives: To identify content of course related the needs of students with disabilities who are included in general classrooms with general education teachers; To disseminate information and hold development conferences with Leadership Team members; To develop the course outline.
GOAL III: To collaboratively deliver the graduate course at a school site.	Objectives: To recruit participants from general and special education; To encourage peer collaborative teamwork; To deliver the course according to the course outline.
GOAL IV: To evaluate and disseminate the process and outcome of the project.	Objectives: To solicit input from the Alliance members and Leadership Team as related to the project; To collect qualitative and quantitative data for indicators of altered beliefs or behaviors; to disseminate the results of the project.

Table 2

Responses to Attitude Statements by Leadership Team Members (N=25)

Mean	Attitude Statement
4.04	1. Most students with disabilities (S w/D) will make an adequate attempt to complete their assignments
3.96	2. Integration of S w/D will necessitate extensive retraining of general classroom teachers.
4.44	3. Integration offers mixed group interaction that will foster understanding and acceptance of differences among students.
3.60	4. It is likely that S w/D will exhibit behavior problems in a general classroom.
3.25	5. Students with disabilities can best be served in general classrooms.
3.76	6. The extra attention S w/D require will be to the detriment of the other students.
4.28	7. The challenge of being in a general classroom will promote the academic growth of the student with a disability.
3.64	8. Integration of S w/D will require significant changes in general classroom procedures.
3.56	9. Increased freedom in the general classroom creates too much confusion for the student with a disability.
3.44	10. General classroom teachers have the ability necessary to work with S w/D.
2.72	11. The presence of students with disabilities will not promote acceptance of differences on the part of students without disabilities.
2.40	12. The behavior of students with disabilities will set a bad example S w/D.
3.28	13. The student with a disability will probably develop academic skills more rapidly in a general classroom than in a special classroom.
2.42	14. Integration of S w/D will not promote his or her social independence.
3.20	15. It is not more difficult to maintain order in a general classroom that contains a S w/D than in one that does not contain a S w/D.
2.84	16. Students W/D will not monopolize the general classroom teacher's time.
4.64	17. The integration of students with disabilities can be beneficial for students without disabilities.
3.04	18. Students with disabilities are likely to create confusion in the general classroom.
2.60	19. General classroom teachers have sufficient training to teach S w/D.
2.76	20. Integration will likely have a negative effect on the emotional development of the student with a disability.
4.64	21. Students with disabilities should be given every opportunity to function in the general classroom where possible.
2.36	22. The classroom behavior of the S w/D generally does not require more patience from the teacher than does the classroom behavior of the student without a disability.
4.32	23. Teaching S w/D is better done by special than by general classroom teachers.
2.72	24. Isolation in a special classroom has a beneficial effect on the social and emotional development of the student with a disability.
3.12	25. The S w/D will not be socially isolated in the general classroom.

Note: 1=the greatest disagreement and 6=the greatest agreement with the statement.